



The influence of gender upon social networks and bootstrapping behaviours



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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the influence of gender upon networking and bootstrapping behaviour drawing on a sample of entrepreneurs in the early stages of business start-up in the context of deprived communities in a developed economy. Whilst the data confirms the importance of bootstrapping for all new ventures, gender differences are identified in the use of strong and weak ties to support bootstrapping activities. A number of variations are subject to gendered influences; in addition, men and women make differing use of brokers. We also note a number of broad similarities between the bootstrapping and networking activities of women and men which dispel notions of essential gender differences thus, responding to calls to use positivist research to challenge, rather than axiomatically seek confirmation, of assumptions of essential female entrepreneurial deficiency.

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1. Introduction

Accruing appropriate and diverse entrepreneurial resources is critical to ensure effective new venture creation; those who draw on a varied and rich pool of resources during the start-up period are more likely to found sustainable firms with growth potential (Aspelund, Berg-Utby, & Skjevda, 2005; Khaire, 2010). However, contextual factors such as location, space and time affect the type, nature and quality of resources available to entrepreneurial actors (Bruton 2010; Zahra, Wright & Abdelgawad, 2014). In addition, ascribed social characteristics mitigate how individuals access vital entrepreneurial resources (McAdam, 2012; Marlow, 2014). We recognise the effect of contextual and socially ascribed factors when focusing upon the influence of gender upon access to entrepreneurial resources by drawing upon a sample of female and male entrepreneurs starting new ventures in a developed economy. This broad focus is analytically narrowed *via* an investigation of how gender influences networking activities which enable the accrual of entrepreneurial resources through bootstrapping to support new venture creation (Anderson, Drackopoulou-Dodd, & Jack, 2010; Jones, MacPherson, & Jayawarna, 2014; Khaire, 2010).

Our perspective is informed by literature suggesting that when establishing new ventures, gender influences the nature and

effectiveness of networking activities (Coleman & Robb, 2015). For example, there is evidence that networks dominated by women are likely to be smaller and lower in density, range and tie-strength (Hill, Leitch, & Harrison, 2006; Martin 2001); however, women are more adept at informal networking (Bogren, von Friedrichs, Rannemo, & Widding, 2013). As social networks are embedded within and reflect gendered stereotypes, those dominated by women echo negative valuations associated with femininity (Fine, 2010) and so, command lower value and credibility. This in turn, limits access to and accrual of entrepreneurial resources (Greve & Salaff 2003; Marlow & McAdam, 2013). Thus, analysing how gendered differences in social networking and bootstrapped resource accumulation impact upon venture creation and sustainability remains an important area of enquiry (Neergaard, Shaw, & Carter, 2005; McAdam 2012).

It is acknowledged that social networks are a key mechanism for acquiring entrepreneurial resources (Anderson et al., 2010). Given liabilities of newness and smallness (Aldrich & Auster, 1986) however, most novice entrepreneurs face specific challenges in accessing formal provision of resources (Jones et al., 2014). Accordingly, bootstrapping – which denotes resource accrual through informal pathways – is likely to be adopted (Winborg & Landström, 2001; Coleman & Robb, 2015). Using data from over 200 nascent entrepreneurs who participated in a UK support programme for novice entrepreneurs (Rouse & Jayawarna, 2006) we test a series of hypotheses related to the influence of gender on resource acquisition, bootstrapping and social networks.

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